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The Effect of Media on Female Self Image

Self image is defined as “the idea one has of one’s abilities, appearance, and personality” (Dictionary.com). In America today, standards of female beauty and responsibility are portrayed through all forms of media, which frequently leads to poor self image among women. Due to various magazines and advertisements, women in today’s society are bombarded with images that portray the standards of beauty, thus creating expectations of body image that are not physically possible. Television also contributes by portraying stereotypical roles of women, showing that they are meant to be nothing but in the house at all times in order to clean and take care of the family. Digital media also tends to encourage social comparison between women by portraying models as perfect, forcing the everyday woman to aspire to be just like that. Media today has been shown to have a negative effect on female self image due to its creation of unrealistic expectations of body image, portrayal of stereotypical female roles, and encouragement of social comparison among women.

For many, body image is an aspect of self confidence that is not found easily. In society today, it is becoming more and more difficult for a woman to be truly happy with her body. With factors such as Photoshop and retouching, and even models who are truly skinny, females today are exposed to numerous accounts of unattainable bodies. The average American woman is “5’4’’ tall, and weighs 166 pounds. In comparison, the average model is 5’10’’ tall and weighs only 107 pounds” (Serdar). These models are exceptionally thin, and it creates a sense in women that they need to achieve these unrealistic expectations. Women are made to believe that these bodies are what they are supposed to look like, rather than seeing it as something that is created for advertising or modeling purposes. Although these images affect women of all ages, media tends to reach the younger generation easier due to the various outlets of media they are exposed to. The average teenager spends so much time on social media, reading fashion magazines, or even playing with dolls such as Barbie, all of which expose her to unrealistic images of female bodies. For young girls, dolls can be the number one factor in portrayal of seemingly perfect proportions. In reality, “women would have to grow two feet taller, extend their neck by 3.2 inches, gain 5 inches in chest size, and lose 6 inches in waist circumference to obtain the proportions of a Barbie doll” (Stampler). No woman could ever hope to achieve these impossible dimensions, yet young girls are exposed to them on a daily basis. In general, women and young girls are constantly being exposed to bodies that are expected of them, yet those bodies are normally unreal or physically unattainable. Media today, especially models and dolls, creates an unrealistic expectation of body image that will most likely never be met.

Throughout the ages, women have been put into many different stereotypes. The typical television show portrays women as the mom, the housewife, the primary caregiver, emotional, and most importantly, attractive. It has been seen that “early research studies, especially on television, showed that women were rarely portrayed and that, when they were, such portrayals tended to be heavily stereotyped” (Ross 371). Women tend to be be scarcer in primetime television, and when they are present, they are rarely in prestigious positions. Typically, women on television get placed in the stereotypes of weak, relationship focused, and physically attractive. These stereotypes lend younger girls and women the idea that females can not have strong, powerful roles in life. The media is supporting the idea that “the common image [for women] is a submissive wife and mother located within a domestic setting” (Wolska), which is degrading to the self image of women today. Many think that if the media was to support the uprising of women from traditional settings, female self confidence would not only benefit women, but all of America today.

Most of all, media encourages social comparison among women. There are many different sources to which individuals look for social comparison, but media is seen to be the most commanding influence, especially for women. With media today, it is difficult for a woman to not look at a commercial or magazine ad without comparing themselves to it. The ads and the “pervasiveness of the media make it very challenging for most women to avoid evaluating themselves against the sociocultural standard of beauty” (Serdar). Most ads target women who may feel insecure about themselves and give them the idea that if they follow certain steps or eat certain things that they will be able to look like the girls on the cover of a magazine. If women see discrepancies between themselves and the models, they are more inclined to make changes to their bodies. Many forms of research have found that “women who report frequently comparing themselves to other women, especially women in the media, are more likely to show signs of negative mood and body image disturbance” (Serdar) than those who do not. Media creates a standard for which women are expected to aspire, yet that standard is almost completely impossible. Women today are subjected to many different types of advertisements and television shows that promote social comparison, making it almost impossible for them not to compare themselves to others, proving the effect on female self image is undeniable when it comes to social comparison.

In this day and age, media is everything. It is how we communicate with one another, but it is also how we undermine each other. Media has been shown to negatively affect female self image due to its perception of beauty, stereotypical female roles, and encouragement of social comparison. Today, the depiction of beauty media portrays is unrealistic and unattainable, and causes women to lose confidence in their personal body image. In television, women are viewed as someone who is meant to be the caregiver and remain at home all day, rather than a worker or boss. Both television and mass media encourage social comparison among women, creating the idea that one woman has to look like another. The effect media on female self image is overall degrading, and although many are beginning to realize that the media’s depiction is not always correct, these factors will not only change this generation of women, but the many to come after.

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